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ABSTRACT

A study of communication patterns in a desegregated school, located in an urban middle class black neighborhood, revealed "meddlin" (verbal and nonverbal aggression) to be a key area of cultural dissonance. This pattern is more common among blacks. Name calling, rumor mongering, body bluster, verbal intimidation, taking or destroying others' property, and physical assaults are some of the manifestations of individual and group attack. Reasons for this aggression include: (1) racism and the need to earn respect; (2) socialization to violence; (3) inadequate academic work and the need to save face; (4) responding to the self-fulfilling prophecy that blacks are more physical; (5) poor impulse control of anger; (6) sexual competition; (7) desire to test one's strength and establish position in a peer hierarchy; (8) peer pressure; and (9) desire for attention. "Meddlin" occurs more in the classroom than the playground and also in the hallways and especially the bathrooms. Both blacks and whites are targets of aggression and most fights are intra-racial. The long term negative consequences of "meddlin" outweigh the positive gains in self-esteem sometimes made by individual aggressors. (Author/EB)

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Meddlin': Aggression as Cultural Dissonance in a Desegregated School

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Schools involve work places and work tasks. To the extent that there are shared values and behavior styles among workers, it is more likely for the work places to be harmonious and for work tasks to be accomplished.

Children from white, liberal, civil rights activist families speaking negatively, like conservative "red necks", about blacks, after attending desegregated schools throughout the United States catalyzed a study of cultural similarities and differences in an urban desegregated magnet school with a court-mandated 50-50 black-white ratio in each classroom.

My initial hypothesis was that children of different cultures, which coincided with color, did not understand each other's nonverbal communications. This was only partly true. They understood many of the messages and did not like them or the ways in which the messages were sent. In addition, social class appeared salient as Wilson (1978) reports in his recent work. The few middle class blacks in the school shared more in common with the middle class whites (from families with an average income of $21,000), than the majority of blacks who came from homes with average incomes of $9,000. The black PTA president and educator reported that her child at six years told her, "Mommy, I don't want to play with blacks, they don't play nice."

A year-long study of children's social relations and communication in an elementary school with a superior "Pacesetter" educational program of individualized instruction for the gifted, average, and slow learner, located in a Dallas black single-dwelling home neighborhood to which whites volunteer to be bused revealed meddlin' to be the key area of cultural dissonance.

> "If somebody just be messin' with you, just to try and aggravate you, just hit ya and do it with words, that's "meddlin'" explained a sixth grade black girl (12)."

The creation of the black community in which the school is located was the result of terror and fire bombing. Whites pushed blacks out of prime economic areas under a segregated system and gave them some control of their schools which blacks lost when the court ordered

desegregation. When blacks lost their administrators and teachers, they lost symbols of pride. In the past, close proximity of black and white often led to violence, so that the court ordered desegregation created community anxiety.

In this paper I will briefly describe the meddlin' stimuli, arenas, targets, constraints, styles, and consequences. The children tell the story. Children's comments on what it is like to be a student at Pacesetter, confirmed by participant observation and school personnel and parent reports, provide the data. Using an open-ended set of questions, I interviewed a random sample of 120 students stratified on the bases of sex, race, and grades 2, 4, and 6 chosen to reflect different levels of cognitive and social development. The salience of meddlin' is clear from children's comments about their likes and dislikes concerning the school, what they consider appropriate behavior in different settings, fears of other children, and the reasons for these fears. Regardless of sex, race, and grade level, children report that blacks fight more, and value it more than whites. Some children say blacks fight to hurt more than whites. Whites and some blacks react aversively to meddlin' or misinterpret its ramifications, including the initiation of friendship.

Some adults, myself included, insisted, "Kids will be kids--we all know about Tom Sawyer, the Little Rascals, Lord of the Flies, and bullies in every neighborhood. But when over a period of time children who had friends with black skins prior to attending the desegregated school continued to say, "Blacks get me in trouble," "I don't like Pacesetter," "I'm sick, I can't go to school," "It was so noisy in class I spent two hours in the nurse's office because of my headache," and children continue to report on black children's misdeeds to the exclusion of white children's misdeeds, it is important to explore what is happening and why.

Aggression, the desire or intention to harm another person, is part of normal, nonpathological functioning. It is a complex set of behaviors mediated by personality, physical endowment, social, and environmental forces. Aggression may be reactive, a learned response to antecedents that cause frustration. Aggression may also have a motivational dynamic of its own in which the individual tries to remove some aversive, internal drive, or frustration tension. Some individuals are aggressive because they anticipate reaping rewards from such behavior. Children learn through observing, imitating models, and positive reinforcement.

Let us turn to what appear to be wellsprings and other stimuli for aggression in the Pacesetter elementary school. In his book Why Blacks Kill Blacks (1972), the black Harvard Medical School psychiatrist Poussaint argues that black violence is self hatred for repressed rage at being docile and self effacing in order to survive. Even if black children have not been discriminated against, they pick up attitudes from family experiences and media reports. A white girl said, "Fighting is because, like they blame it on you saying it's your fault they were slaves...It's not my fault" (106 wg 6th). Comer and Poussaint (1975:12) explain, "Racism forces blacks to fight for the respect that whites take for granted." Another black psychiatrist, Harrison-Ross (1973), found some black parents realize their anti-white hostility through encouraging their children not to "let any of those whites to push you around."

Blacks have been socialized to what has been called "a culture of violence" through experience in slavery, the South, and Texas. Lunsgaarde's (1977) cultural analysis of Houston homicide patterns is revealing in this regard. Emphasis on the importance of the body in strong action has roots in ontogenetic development for all children--the body being the first instrument of power--and for blacks in slave auctions where the body indicated the individual's capability for work. Continued work opportunities requiring physical prowess and

a black cultural pattern of expressive performance and role validation (acting out) (Gay and Abrahams 1973, Kochman 1971) sustain the body emphasis. Lower class children, including the majority of blacks at Pacesetter, experience inconsistent harsh, physical discipline, and ridicule, and this socialization encourages similar kinds of behavior (Gans 1962, Miller 1958).

The perceived need for defensive structuring (Seigel 1970) or saving face is another stimulus to aggression. Chidlren continually seek self identity and esteem. Most of the black children are two grade levels behind in academic achievement, and public revelation of their inadequate school work through oral recitation, etc., leads them to trying to gain recognition in other ways. Meddlin' may allow a child to be in control, and by belittling the formal schooling and its ethic deny power to confer a negative evaluation that affects the child's self-image.

Aggression also occurs because it is expected. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, some whites emit signals suggesting blacks fight, and so some blacks "pick up the gauntlet."

Another well-spring of aggression is anger because of what someone does deliberately or inadvertently. Sexual competition is another cause of fighting. "Girls! Fighting over girls. It starts in kindergarten" (113 bb 6th). A black second grader reported: "a white and black boy was fighting. The black boy had a girl friend and the white boy was messin' with his girl." Another catalyst of meddlin' is the desire to test and prove one's strength as well as establish rank in the pecking order. Peer pressure in an active or reactive encounter triggers aggression. Black children rely on peer influences for self evaluation more than white children. So when the group eggs a member on: "Beat him up" and crowds around, fighting in inevitable. Seeking attention leads to fights. A white fourth grade boy said, "They pick on you to make you recognize them."

To summarize, the stimuli for aggression are (1) racism and the need to earn respect, (2) socialization to violence, (3) inadequate academic work and the need to save face, (4) responding to a self-fulfilling prophecy that blacks are more physical, (5) poor impulse control of anger, (6) sexual competition, (7) desire to test one's strength and establish position in a peer hierarchy, (8) peer pressure, and (9) desire for attention.

What are the arenas of meddlin'? A few children at Pacesetter said the classroom permits more opportunity for aggression against another child than the playground. In the classroom there is only one teacher to watch; on the playground there are several. Meddlin' also occurs in the hallways and especially the restrooms.

Who are the targets of meddlin'? Blacks and whites are targets of aggression. However, as is the case among adults, most fights are intra-racial. Boys fight more, although girls do fight, and sometimes a girl beats up a boy. A target may be an aggressor's equal. More often children who are unequal in some way--newcomers, physically handicapped, differently dressed, scholastic achievers who are not athletes, and children who appear to "put on airs" or brag are vulnerable to meddlin'.

We sketched some stimuli, arenas, and targets of aggression. What are the styles of aggression? Although there are one-on-one fights as is the case when two equals challenge each other or a bully picks on an individual, among blacks who are kin or neighborhood friends, alliance or gang behavior is common. On the playground I observed a rumble among third grade black girls. Another time, standing in line to enter the school building, a black boy pinched the right buttock of the white boy standing in front of him. The child responded by hitting his molester with this elbow. Thereupon the aggressor's black friend who was standing in front of the white child hit him.

Verbal aggression includes calling people insulting names or descriptive words denigrating the physical peculiarities or behavior traits of a child, parodying a child's name, talking about a black child's mama (a highly incendiary act). Indeed teachers stopped children from talking about their own mothers' contributions to the school lest the black children misunderstand). "Putting them down" is a style of meddlin' to make children feel sorry that they ever came into the world. Sounds are as important as the verbal and visual sense that is communicated. Folklorists have documented children's fartlore. Using profanity is another style of aggression. Talking about someone--rumor mongering and hearsay--to upset a person, lying to get someone in trouble, and threatening are other meddlin' styles. Ostracism--not talking to a person can be another aggressive mode.

Styles of nonverbal aggression include body bluster (posing, moving, and arranging one's appearance in a menancing way to make oneself threatening or put someone down), abusing others' possessions, creating situations to get a child into trouble, and physical assaults--kicking, hitting, finger tweaking, blowing pins out of straws "chunking" rocks, crickets, or other objects, pushing, and invading personal space in the restroom. There is a fascination with what is called booty, hinney, ass or butt kicking or pinching. Another style of aggression is school vandalism which includes throwing water bombs on the restroom walls or writing on them, wetting rolls of paper cloths and throwing them on the windows, heaters, and fans to jam them; squirting soap on the floor, using the "bathroom all over the bathroom," and making missy on the floor and skiin' on it."

What are the responses to aggression? Children use strong suit tactics. Whites at Pacesetter tend to respond to meddlin' with passive "safe" strategies of taking it, complying with demands, or disengaging oneself with the mediation of a teacher or protection of a "patron" or one's ability to divert an aggressor with humor, negotiation, or withdrawal. Physically weaker children often have protectors whom they tell if someone meddles them, and the stronger child takes up for the weaker.

Some white and more black children respond to meddlin' in a reciprocal manner, tit for tat. Indeed, if a child perceives the possibility of attack, the effective strategy is believed to be to strike first.

There are four general constraints on aggression: An adult presence, an activity during which aggression occurs comes to an end, fear of painful retaliation, and knowledge that authority figures will learn of the aggression and penalize it.

What are the consequences of meddlin'? The aggressors' rewards are gaining attention; improving self concept, esteem, and position in the peer hierarchy; getting one's way (material or immaterial gain); reducing tension built up from classroom anxiety or anger; and having the thrill of exploring alternatives--being dominant rather than subordinate in society.

Aldis, an ethologist who studied play aggression (1975), argues that thrill seeking in play has the advantage of acquiring skills for emergencies. The predators and victims who learn to handle the aggression--deflecting it or retaliating--develop inner strength, control, adaptability, and sensitivity to multiple communication channels. Part of handling aggression is assertiveness. This trait is associated with black educational achievement and such middle class attitudes and behavior as knowing where to find jobs. Fighting of course causes pain. Children learn how to avoid threats and to use brokers to mediate between themselves and adversaries.

There are, of course, negative consequences of aggression. The

work of formal schooling takes second place to the foremost challenges of bullies, bullied, protected, and funny people when meddlin' is persvasive.

Too much or too dramatic aggression gets an individual into trouble with the authorities. Fighters are sent to the principal's office. When black's parents are called in the child usually gets "whupped." "They beat the shit out of them" when they have to lose wages, a parent noted. Suspension or being sent to a special school are possibilities.

The Pacesetter school children's perception of more black than white aggression leads some blacks and whites to have negative attitudes toward blacks. Of course, these are futher shaped and supported by prejudices in American society. "Dumb, physical, mean, and unpredictable" are common categorizations deriving from perceived black aggression. Some blacks, especially from middle class backgrounds who share white middle class cultural values, feel embarrassed by being identified with the group "black." The courts mandate class assignments by color not class. Children generalize to an entire group. They become resentful when black aggressors cause the entire class to be punished for the misbehavior of a few--the assumption that peer pressure brings misbehavers into line is fallacious when the children's social rule is to fight whom you challenge. Some black children escape disciplinary measures because teachers fear their authority will only be publically shattered. They also fear confrontations with black parents. The aggression contributes to degregation in desegregation. Voluntary seating patterns observed over the year were blacks seated with blacks and whites, with whites. Occasionally there was a contrastingly colored person in a group. Expressive forms are often exclusionary. Black girls rarely permit white girls to be full participants in their dance ring plays and cheers. Black boys dominate the football field. The toilet areas are definitely black turf, unpleasant areas of harassment and impediments to natural body functions. After school, many black and white children rush directly to their home toilets, sometimes with soiled pants. Competitive sports eliminate many children because arguments over rules, who plays, etc. lead to fighting.

Equal, formal educational opportunity may be necessary but it is not sufficient for individuals to achieve the skills necessary for socioeconomic success in adult pursuits carried on within the law. Positive social relations and shared communicative patterns are also critical. Aggression manifestations are new and dramatic for many children and for others they negatively affect academic achievement and perhaps later socio-economic advancement, i.e., the unpleasant encounters may have far reaching and powerful implications if they are not dealt with. Sociologist James S. Coleman, whose massive study in the mid-1960's was used to support school desegregation, now says it is a "mistaken belief that black students learn better in desegregated classrooms. Desegregation has turned out to be much more complicated than any of us ever realized," (quoted in Feinberg 1978). Scharr and Weinberg in their recent American Sociological Review article (1978) point out the problem of naive environmentalism. My research supports the notion that social contact theories need to be reconciled with social distance theories. I have broken a taboo (a set of unspoken behavioral norms preventing reference to differences that involve color that exists in civil rights circles) on discussing sensitive issues found in many areas (cf. Schofield 1977) and focused on children's perceptions of a social relations problem, a reality that mocks adult ideals. I have tried to place the problem in historical context and offer some explanations derived from theoretical and empirical studies in related areas. The process of identifying a problem and exploring its ramifications is critical to effective social policy. In a larger report on my research I conclude by drawing upon techniques some Pacesetter teachers, students, and parents found to be effective as well as those evaluated in the educational and psychological literature to suggest some prescriptive strategies for improving desegregated schooling.

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